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“Law and Atonement in the Execution of Saul’s Seven Sons”

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In II Samuel 21:1-14 we find an unusual story which has been troublesome to a large company of commentators both conservative and modernistic. A quick first reading of the account of David’s execution of Saul’s seven sons has suggested biblical tolerance for unrighteous tribal vengeance against the innocent, human sacrifice, rain magic, etc. Such misjudgments in themselves call us to a more insightful reading of the text and thereby the exercise of a specific apologetical task, expounding its proper meaning.

However, there exists a more constructive or positive reason for looking into this passage in this day. When understood correctly, God’s word in II Samuel 21 has an unmistakable and forceful message which is relevant to modern theology as well as the current condition of national politics. Hence we propose to explore the text here in order to indicate important truths about the nature of atonement and law.

The Holy Spirit speaking in II Samuel 21:1-14 teaches us that Jehovah, Israel’s righteous judge, mercifully accepts the atonement offering of life for life according to His ever-valid law such that the curse for violations of a covenant is lifted. Sin (notably in civic leaders) is not overlooked by God but must inevitably be atoned if His favor is to be gained; such grace is necessarily in accordance with His law.

In his first verse of the pericope¹[1] we read that there was a famine in the land for three consecutive years; its character was that of drought (v. 10). Probably a poor first year was expected to be matched by a second

[1] This passage is generally viewed as part of an eclectic appendix which gives various perspectives on David’s life and character in an unchronological order (cf. J.P. Lange, F. Gardiner, R. A. Carlson, H.W. Hertzberg, Keil and Delitsch, as well as the International Critical Commentary, Cambridge and Interpreter’s Bibles). If such is the case, II Samuel 21:1-14 would narrate events which occurred some time after those related in chapter 9, for chapter 21 assumes David’s previous acquaintance with Mephibosheth (cf. 21:7). Furthermore, chapter 21 would appear to precede the rebellion of Absalom wherein Shimei cursed David with words that possibly refer to the incidents of chapter 21 (cf. 16:7). However, it should be held that Shimei’s

prosperous year, but when that did not eventuate it became evident in the third year that famine conditions had overtaken the land. Thus David went to the Lord, either visiting the tent of meeting (cf. Ex. 33:7) or consulting the Urim and Thummin (cf. I Sam. 28:6). Although David had been tardy in seeking Jehovah's face, the Lord readily answered the king's inquiry. In contrast to Jeremiah 15:1-2, where the prayers of even Moses and Samuel could not remove a judgmental famine, David's approach unto God in this case finally brought about the lifting of His curse.

According to God's law, famine would be one of the punishments sent by God upon *national* wickedness and disobedience (cf. Lev. 26:21, 26; e.g., Ruth 1:1; I Kings 17:1ff.; II Kings 4:38; 8:1; Lamentations 4:4ff.; Ezekiel 14:21): "But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of Jehovah thy God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes . . . Jehovah will make the rain of thy land powder and dust" (Deuteronomy 28:15, 24). When David came to the Lord he was told that the particular sin which had incurred the drought and famine was to be explained as *blood resting upon Saul and his house*.^{2[2]}

What did this mean? The law of God specified that when an innocent man was murdered, his blood rested upon the murderer (Deuteronomy 19:10; e.g., Judges 9:24; II Samuel 1:16). The law further declared that unexpiated murder "defiled the land" and brought national punishment (Num. 35: 33-34; Deut. 21:7-9), for Jehovah abhors the bloodthirsty (Ps. 5:6). Hence David was being told that the nation was suffering for the defilement of murder, a crime committed by Saul and his house. The murderous deed of Saul's house was specifically identified as a massacre of the Gibeonites (II Sam. 21:1-2).

If this incident pertains to Saul's putting away of witches (I Sam. 28) or slaying the priests of Nob (I Sam. 2), there is no textual evidence for us to think so. Most likely there is nothing else known of this incident except what we are told here. The parenthetical remark at the end of v. 2 in our passage (namely, the Gibeonites were Canaanites, not Israelites) likely functions to remind us that Joshua had much earlier made a covenant with the deceptive Gibeonites, agreeing to spare them and protect them (cf. Joshua 9). Psalm 15:4 promises blessing for those who swear to their own disadvantage and yet change not. Thus Israel was bound by its oath to Gibeon. However, by contrast to the man described by the Psalmist, Saul demonstrated (hypocritical) "zeal" and attempted to exterminate the covenanted Gibeonites from the land of Israel altogether (v. 5). Why Saul did this we do not know. John Bright's suggestion that the Gibeonites were collaborating with the Philistines against Israel^{3[3]} would mean that they, rather than Saul, were the party guilty of breaking the covenant. Yet the text blames Saul. It is most important to note that v. 1 places the guilt for this crime on Saul's house as well as upon the former king himself.

curse is better explained in its context (i.e., the murders of Ishoboseth and Abner) and as not truly applying to David (cf. 16:12). There is no good reason for us to refrain from seeing 21:1-14 as following chapter 20 in proper chronological order (i.e., after Sheba's rebellion and preceding David's census), as Matthew Henry maintained. Compare I Chronicles 21:12 with II Samuel 24:12-13, where the mention of seven years would be explained as three years of past famine, the present year, and then three more years of expected plague ensuing upon David's census.

2[2] Note the interpretive translation of the Septuagint: "Upon Saul and upon his house is the guilt of the bloodshed."

3[3] John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 169.

David recognized that atonement had to be made if Jehovah's inheritance (i.e., the land and its people: cf. I Sam. 26:19; II Sam. 20:19) was to be blessed again. Jehovah makes inquisition for blood and forgets not the cry of the meek (Ps. 9:12), and thus David was directed by the Lord to seek out the Gibeonites. What is remarkable is that the arrangements to be made by David after consultation with the Lord are not simply judicial retribution for particular criminals, but what he is to do is also "atonement" for the *land*. The word used in v. 3 is identical with the key word for expiation or atonement throughout Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers; its association with theological propitiation through the priestly ceremonies is undeniable. Hence we are alerted to the fact that we have a very unique lesson being taught, just as in Numbers 25. In that place we read that Jehovah's anger was kindled against Israel for joining itself to Baal-peor, and Moses was told to execute all those who had sinned. When an Israelite appeared (namely, Zimri, a prince among the Simeonites) with a Midianite princess before the congregation which was weeping at the door of the tabernacle, Aaron's grandson, Phinehas, thrust them through with a spear, thereby halting the plague God had sent. In Numbers 25:13 we read that Phinehas, in so doing, "made atonement for the children of Israel." Likewise, what David does in II Samuel 21 is designated an *atonement* when he has criminals who have brought God's judgment on the land executed. This was not a customary way of speaking or continuing practice in Israel.

If the execution and atonement are going to be acceptable to God, they must be in accordance with His law. Consequently, when David asked the Gibeonites what must be done in order to atone for the breach of the covenant with them, they replied that pecuniary payment could not compensate for blood-guilt. Numbers 35:31 declared, "ye shall take no ransom for the life of a murderer that is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death." The demand of judicial retribution is life for life (Ex. 21:12; cf. Gen. 9:5-6). Moreover, the Gibeonites recognized that they were powerless in themselves to carry out the sanction of God's law, since they were not judges or rulers in Israel. With these things noted (v. 4), and receiving David's indication of willingness to do what must be done, the Gibeonites then requested that a portion of Saul's household be executed.

Many commentators err just at this point. It is important to understand that this requested atonement is not a concession to pagan ideas of collective guilt.^{4[4]} Nor is it an infringement against the law of Deuteronomy 24:16, which prescribed that children were not to be executed for the crime of their parents.^{5[5]} No necessity for rationalizing the text exists. The first verse of the passage had already revealed that Saul's *house* was guilty in the plot against the Gibeonites. What we have is a case parallel to that of Achan in Joshua 7. There the nation was afflicted for an individual's sin, and ultimately the family of the individual was executed along with him (for they could hardly have failed to detect Achan's burying money and keeping war spoil in his tent). They were guilty, at least, of complicity with him. Saul's house was guilty of the murderous crime against the Gibeonites, and thus punishment was due to the participants in Saul's evil deed. We can observe that in the earlier incident over the priests of Nob, Saul's family was *not* incriminated, for in this case they had no part in the crime (only the alien Edomite could be found to carry out Saul's scheme). By contrast, in II Samuel 21, Saul's family *is* held accountable, and the obvious reason (just as v. 1 had said) is that they were guilty as well.

4[4] As suggested by, e.g., J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), pp. 229-230.

5[5] As suggested by, e.g., Matthew Henry in his commentary (many publications) as well as many other commentators.

A world of difference is made in the interpretation of this pericope depending upon how David's permission for the seven sons of Saul to be executed is viewed. The presumption must be that in seeking God's face David was directed by the Lord to do what he did in order that the famine be removed. In such a context, where divine judgment is already being experienced, David was not likely to violate God's righteous demands. Furthermore, we are given no sign of God's disapproval of David's action; to the contrary, the terminating result of David's act of propitiation was the sending of rain by God and thus the lifting of punishment (v. 10). The text mentions no conflict between God's law and pagan customs, and if the execution of Saul's seven sons is a public crime, it is strange that no priest or prophet rises to protest it. We conclude, then, that David was not guilty of any wrong in approving of the Gibeonites' suggested course of action.

The manner of execution mentioned is that of crucifixion or hanging (v. 6).^{6[6]} The custom was to execute the criminal, and then impale him for public exposure (cf. Num. 25:4-5). Such a procedure was an aggravated form of capital punishment due to the open display of the criminal's outcome. Verses 6 and 9 say that this crucifixion was to be "unto" or "before" Jehovah; that is, it was a public exhibition of punishment inflicted as the demand of divine justice for the expiation of the sin and propitiation of divine wrath (cf. "before Jehovah" in I Sam. 15:33). It was not a matter of human revenge. The execution took place in Gibeah, Saul's hometown and capital (cf. I Sam. 10:25; 11:4; 15:33). Not only would the offenders be *crucified*, which in itself is a peculiar mark of God's disfavor (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13), but they would also be left *exposed for the birds and beasts to feed upon*, thereby experiencing the ultimate humiliation and disgrace that could befall the dead (cf. I Sam. 17:44; I Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:24; Ps. 79:2-3; Isa. 18:6; 56:9; Jer. 7:33; 12:9; 15:3; 16:4; 19:37; 34:20; Ezek. 32:4-5; 33:27; 299:5; 39:4, 17-20). Indeed, one of the curses for disobedience to the law was that violators would suffer such great ignominy, rather than being granted the customary respect prescribed in Deuteronomy 21:23 (namely, the hanged corpse was to be taken down by nightfall). Such an awful execution was a severe reminder of the depth of divine wrath upon covenant breakers; as expiation for guilt lying upon the whole land or nation, the bodies were left until the efficaciousness of the act was seen and divine forgiveness displayed (with the coming of rain).

Thus, seven of Saul's sons were to be crucified. To the Jewish mind the number seven had sacred overtones, indicating wholeness or completeness (cf. The sabbatical calendar; Prov. 9:1; Jud. 16:13, 19 Gen. 21:28ff.; etc.). A perfect and efficacious atonement was to be made through this execution. While avenging the breach of an oath, however, David did not break another oath; Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, was spare according to David's word to Jonathan (v. 7; cf. I Sam. 18:3; 20:8, 16). Specifically, the victims were Saul's two sons by the concubine Rizpah (cf. V. 11; 3:7) and his five grandsons born to his daughter Merab.^{7[7]} These seven (there probably were no others) were crucified together at the first of the barley harvest (v. 9), which would have been Passover season (cf. Lev. 23:9-14); the text draws particular attention to this timing. This crucifixion would make perfect atonement for a violated covenant at the time of Passover and thereby effect the passing of god's judgment from the land.

Rizpah, living on a bed (or in a tent) of sackcloth, stayed on the rock where the corpses hung and prevented the utter shame of vulture devourment from coming upon them. She stayed until the early Autumn rains gave the sign from heaven of god's propitiation and the removal of the famine (v. 10). At this indication the corpses

^{6[6]} See S. R. Driver's discussion of the Hebrew construction in *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford, 1913).

^{7[7]} The textual reading of "Michal" in verse 8 is evidently a very early scribal error. Merab was the wife of Adrile (I Sam. 18:19), and Michal died childless (II Sam. 6:23). The Tarbums attempted to handle this problem by translating "yaldah" of the Hebrew text as "raised" instead of "bare, begat" – a move which is unwarranted lexically and contextually (notice that "yaldah" is used of Rizpah also).

could be taken down. David, compassionately moved by Rizpah's gesture of concern (v. 110, personally saw to it that the bones of Saul and Jonathan were retrieved from the men of Jabesh-gilead who had stolen them (v. 12; cf. I Sam. 31), and that the bones of the seven sons were buried with them in the family sepulchre of Kish in Zela (v. 14). In the end, the crucified sons were buried with royalty and nobility. Ultimate shame was averted.

This passage in II Samuel 21:1-14 is loaded with significance for contemporary theology and ethics. Apologetically, we can comment that negative reaction to the incident recounted here stems from a too ready attitude of criticism, willing to impute evolutionary development and interaction of Israel's religion with primitivism and paganism; a more extensive understanding of God's revealed law as background to what takes place in II Samuel 21 is a helpful corrective to misreading the passage.

There are many dominant trends in theology today which are challenged by the teaching of our passage. The primary significance of the pericope lies in its demonstration that the atonement for sin which will find acceptance with God must be according to the righteous demands of His law. God must be just as He becomes the justifier of His people (cf. Rom. 3:26). Atonement is not found in an *existential understanding* of the incarnation (itself given a mystical interpretation) as post-neo-orthodox theologians have postulated in some cases. Nor is atonement to be seen simply as the *ethical impetus* or moral encouragement given by a particular act of suffering, as twentieth-century cultists have resorted to in the long run. Nor can atonement be set in contrast or opposition to the just demands of God's law, as so many *dispensational approaches* to Scripture teach. Atonement is precisely the demand of God's law, carried out in conformity with the law, in order to remove God's wrath for transgression of that law.

Christ was born under the law (Gal. 4:4) and offered himself as a legal sacrifice in order to discharge the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13; Heb. 2:17-3:1; 4:14-5:10). The work of Christ as God's suffering servant was declared to be that of obedience (Isa. 52:13-53: 12; John 6:38; Heb. 10:4-10). Since he learned obedience by his suffering (Heb. 5:8-9), Christ qualified as our substitutionary sacrifice for sin. Indeed, he justified us by his obedience (Rom. 5:19). The law had to be observed and obedience was required before atonement could be made. Law and grace work in harmony, not opposition, to each other.

Only by shed blood can there be forgiveness of sin (Heb. 9:22; cf. Matt. 26:28; I John 1:7). Consequently, only as obedient unto death could Christ redeem us from the curse of the law, nailing our indictment to his cross (Gal. 3:13; Col. 2:14). If the law did not have permanent and abiding validity, this whole transaction would have been unnecessary. The requirement that Christ go to the cross in order to atone for our sin is dramatic verification of the absoluteness of God's law. Thus II Samuel 21:1-14 illustrates the truth that Scripture presents no antinomian grace. God's wrath is occasioned by violation of His law, and this cannot be simply overlooked or dismissed. A propitiatory sacrifice was necessary according to the law. God is a God of wrath and justice, and hence a God of righteous law. Modern-day theologies which attempt to discuss the atonement and circumvent the absolute law of God or the divine wrath resulting from disobedience to it are speculative dreams whose end is destruction, Christ in his atonement had to fully satisfy all the demands of divine justice.

It is only natural that with a disparagement of God's law in modern theologies (radical, cultic, or dispensational) there is a corresponding de-emphasis upon the Old Testament or a distortion of it to preconceived purposes. Liberals do not recognize the organic unity of Scripture stemming from the one living and true God who sovereignly governs every event of history and reveals the saving understanding of His acts in written revelation. Hence the Old Testament becomes a variety of strange events recorded or created in a peculiar Hebrew imagination. Dispensationalists do not account the specific unity of Old and New Testaments in God's grand plan of salvation. Because the Christian supposedly does not live under Old Testament law, there is

little reason to read or understand the Old Testament at all; it becomes a historical witness to failure for various divine methods of dealing with man (and a literal indication of what must come to pass for physical or national Israel toward the end of the age).

However, reformed Christians are called to a much more positive and sound reading of the Old Testament, for throughout it is related to the work of Jesus Christ. The gospel can be (and in the earliest church was) preached from the Old Testament itself. Whatsoever things were written previously were written for our learning, upon whom the ends of the ages have come (Rom. 14:4; cf. I Cor. 10:11). Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel and those that followed, as many as have spoken, foretold the days of Christ and the new covenant (Acts 3:24). The resurrected Christ told his followers on the road to Emmaus that the entire Old Testament, from Moses through the psalms and prophets, testified concerning him, namely that the Messiah must first suffer and then enter into his resurrection glory (Luke 24:25-27, 44-47; cf. Acts 17:2-3; 26:22-23). Thus we are encouraged to take a new look at the passage in II Samuel 21 to see what it revealed about Christ and his saving economy.

There are a number of analogies of circumstance in this pericope which are too appropriate to be ignored completely. The seven sons were crucified at *Passover season* in order to make atonement for a broken covenant (and thus violation of God's covenantal law). Jesus Christ, our substitute, also bore the curse of crucifixion at Passover in order to atone for offenses against the covenantal law. The death of seven sons suggested a complete or perfect atonement, but only the perfected lamb of God could fully and genuinely satisfy divine justice on our behalf. The bodies of the crucified sons were not taken down until the curse of God was lifted; that is, they were not removed until the efficacious nature of the atonement was signified from heaven. Likewise, before his removal from the cross Christ declared "It is finished"; the Father signified the efficacious nature of that atoning death by means of the torn veil in the temple, showing that Christ had opened a way of access to God. Finally, the bodies of Saul's seven sons were finally buried with nobility and delivered from ultimate shame. In a much more spectacular manner, Jesus was not only buried among the wealthy, but his life was delivered from ultimate shame by being delivered in resurrection from the continuing curse of the corruption of the grave. Rightly could Christ tell his disciples that they should have understood from the Old Testament itself that it behooved the Messiah to suffer and then enter into his glory. We today should not be "slow at heart" to believe all that the former Testament, including II Samuel 21, expounds to us concerning Christ; from this text we should be made aware of those abiding principles of justice, mercy, and substitutionary efficacy which characterize God's own provision of atonement in His son Jesus Christ. What we have here is a projection of the gospel seen with the eye of faith.

In addition to teaching these valuable lessons about the atonement (notably its lawful, propitiatory, and efficacious nature in the work of the coming Messiah), II Samuel 21 has further significance for current theology. We see in this passage that the *delay of God's punishment* does not mean that it has been remitted or canceled; Saul may already have been dead, but nevertheless *the land suffered for the iniquities its leader had committed*. The postponement of punishment, then, is no ground for hope that punishment has been averted. People living today cannot hope that God's final judgment will not break in upon them or the world. A strict uniformitarian principle impels unbelieving humanism as well as the radical or existential theology of many alleged theologians (who demythologize the scriptural teaching about Christ's second coming), leading them to say implicitly: "all things continue as they were from the creation, so where is the promise of his coming?" (cf. II Peter 3:3-10). One must interpret the events of history in light of the word of God and thereby understand that, if deserved punishment has not come upon him, it is a sign of God's forbearance and gracious opportunity for repentance. His threats are taken lightly when we begin to presume that (from outward appearances) all is well. God's wrath cannot be escaped except through His atoning provision.

Moreover, in our day we see on all sides the effects of Kant's dialectical philosophy on theology. Kant had taught that man lives in two worlds, that reality is dichotomized between a *phenomenal realm of nature* (where the causal principle holds without fail so that strict determinism applies) and a *nominal realm of personality*

(where the human ego is free and beyond the causal nexus). In the wake of such thinking modern theology has been quick to abandon the history and natural science, preferring to find God in a mystical realm above history and ordinary experience. The realms of morality and physics must be kept separate. Corresponding to this, modern theologians have popularized a distinction between the I-it and the I-thou dimensions of experience or (which is the same thing for modern thought) reality. However, II Samuel 21 clearly demonstrates for the Christian that *moral and physical evil are connected*; the I-it realm is under the control of the I-thou, and the physical world cannot be easily divorced from the spiritual world. Nature is God's servant, and thus *moral evil can be requited with historical punishments* (e.g., drought, famine). The Lord is sovereign over all the works of His hands, and one must never presume to "box him in" to a realm above calendar history and physics (or to an inner, private, experience of the heart).

Having learned valuable lessons about the nature of God and His relationship to the created world and its history, the nature of His law and the atonement offered by the Messiah, we can also turn to the subject of *social ethics* and understand our Christian responsibility in the current demise of political integrity in this as well as other countries of the world. In David's day, the general public suffered for the sin of Saul's house years after the offense. From this we can derive two important principles. *First*, God's law is not subject to a statute of limitations. The Psalmist says, "He saith in his heart, God hath forgotten; He hideth His face and will never see. . . Wherefore doth the wicked contemn God and say in his heart, Thou wilt not require it?" (10:11, 13). God's law has ever-abiding validity, and time does not dispel its punishments, for time cannot wear out the guilt of sin. The permanence of God's law is declared by Christ in Matthew 5:17-19, reminding us that time does not alter the righteousness of God's demands; hence even the advent of the Messiah does not alter our obligation to every jot and tittle of God's word. God's law stands as a perfect criteria of righteousness, not only for the individual but also the nation.

Thus we are led to observe that II Samuel 21 teaches that the people of a nation are genuinely required to take evil away from before the magistrate. *The general public is responsible for the moral integrity of its leaders*; the king's throne must be, as the Proverbs say, established on righteousness (25:5). Sin is a disgrace to any people (Prov. 14:24), and rulers must govern in the fear of God (II Sam. 23:3; Ps. 2:10-12). Therefore, the people of a nation cannot endorse just anything the civil magistrate might do (as some do today under a mistaken reading of Romans 13). Rulers must be rebuked for sin so that they govern in righteousness. Christians must especially be alert to separate themselves from the lawlessness of national leaders (cf. Rev. 14:8-12) – which means promoting the *law of God* over against the law of the "beast" (wherever Satan is manifested). When citizens of God's kingdom do not disapprove of or bewail violations of God's holy law on the part of magistrates, then they will suffer as accessories to the crime, even as II Samuel 21 vividly illustrates.

So then, there are a multitude of lessons about law and atonement that can be seen in II Samuel 21. The passage about David's execution of the seven sons of Saul started out as a challenge to orthodox scholarship due to apparent infelicities in the story. However, in the final analysis, the passage is a challenge to modern theologies which downplay the role of God's law in connection with atonement, which promote an antinomian grace, which dismiss the wrath of God calling for propitiation, which endorse mystical or moral influence views of the atonement, which depreciate the organic unity of Old and New Testaments, which fail to see Christ proclaimed throughout the Scriptures, which place a statute of limitations on God's law, which overlook the Christian's social responsibility, which work on uniformitarian assumptions about the historical realm and assign religion to an inner or personal dimension. The full range of unorthodox schools of thought is undermined by the passage, whether they be radical, neo-orthodox, Arminian, Pelagian, antinomian, or quietistic. May this pericope from God's inspired and profitable word (cf. II Tim. 3:16-17) constantly remind us that God's wrath against our personal and national sins can only be lifted and His punishments avoided when we turn in obedient faith to Christ, the perfect and efficacious atonement for sin. We must see the depth of our responsibility as well as the extent of God's grace as we read how the Lord is both just and the justifier, one who provides atonement in agreement with His law. The execution of Saul's seven sons is but an illustration of this abiding truth.